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Fear of Rejection

The long-imminent strategic arms treaty has finally arrived, and over the next few weeks there will be plenty of time for detailed textual analysis. But listening to many of the proponents over the last few months, we have heard that the text hardly matters. Whatever the flaws the provisions are the best we can do, they argue, and rejecting the deal will only make matters worse.

At the Vienna summit, Soviet Chairman Brezhnev backed this argument with some threats of his own. If the U.S. Senate rejects or even amends the treaty, he warned of "grave and even dangerous consequences for our relations and for the situation in the world as a whole."

The fear of rejection has to be faced squarely. It will be the great subterranean force behind the drive for ratification. Its influence reaches far beyond a final up-or-down vote. In our judgment it has already profoundly influenced the negotiations. And certainly it will influence the drive for amendments. Proposals for amendment are likely to be met not with arguments on their merits but with the objection: yes, yes, but do you want to kill the treaty?

Fear of rejection is in large part simply fear of the unknown, but if you try to break it into analytical pieces you come up with two concerns. Without the treaty, the Soviets will accelerate their military build-up. And without the treaty, the Soviets will stir up more trouble around the world. But the Soviets are already turning out arms like sausages, and are already stirring trouble from Cambodia to Angola to South Yemen. Will SALT really cause them to be more reasonable, or rejecting SALT cause them to be less so?

Even more precisely, what are the real constraints on the Soviets? It's hard to find any serious constraint on their weapons program in SALT. They have conducted a huge build-up, both strategic and conventional, under SALT-I. SALT-II will require them to deactivate some 250 missile silos, but it allows them to add some 5,000 warheads. Within the treaty they can meet any military requirement they are likely to want. Why would they build more without it?

The truly serious constraint on Soviet weapons-building is the economic one. Last June the CIA issued a public assessment of Soviet military spending, showing it growing 4% to 5% a year in constant prices, consuming 11% to 13% of the Soviet GNP, and consuming one-third of the output in machine building and metalworking. A slowing Soviet economy will make it more difficult to sustain this pace, the CIA estimated, but predicted at best a marginal slowing. It added, "Conclusion of a SALT II agreement along the lines currently being discussed would not, in itself, slow the growth of Soviet defense spending significantly."

In the political field, the Soviets have stepped up emigration permits and made a few friendly gestures. But even the gestures are marred by what seems a congenital ill-nature; as when they allow a dissident to flee but drag their feet over his family. In geo-politics, they have supplied arms aid to establish new Marxist regimes in South Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Angola, Ethiopia, Afghanistan and South Yemen. Without SALT, without detente, would it have been nine nations instead of seven?

Regardless of treaty ratification, the Soviets will be constrained by their economic problems, by their succession uncertainties, and most of all by wariness about awakening a West still full of latent power. That is not to say, of course, that it's impossible to wring more military expenditure out of a stagnant economy. And it certainly is not to dismiss the possibility

that they might react to the rejection or amendment of SALT-II with a show of belligerence somewhere in the world, exploiting sooner rather than later the opportunities implicit in a deteriorating U.S. military posture, even in crucial areas such as the Middle East. Yet unless the West does something to redress the underlying military and political deterioration, these opportunities will only grow, and ultimately and inevitably be exploited, with SALT or without it.

This is why Senator Jackson has started to talk about "appeasement." About this he was rather precise: "Diplomatic accommodation becomes appeasement when we make concessions out of fear that the Soviets will cause trouble around the world unless we yield to their desires." The precise mistake made at Munich was to yield to unreasonable demands out of fear of what would happen if those demands were rejected; we learned that appeasement leads to yet more unreasonable demands and higher risks of conflict.

So the debate on SALT comes back to whether the text released yesterday can withstand the scrutiny it will receive, whether it really provides equality or advances the Soviet build-up, whether its terms are meaningful constraints or vaguely ambiguous. If it fails in these respects it should be amended or rejected. If there is no treaty, the essential constraints on Soviet behavior will remain. If a bad treaty is approved, the result is not likely to be a more reasonable Soviet Union. Rather, the result will be even more bold and strident Soviet demands.

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-Estimated Soviet
Defense Spending
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GREAT SALT